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OUR UNDERDEVELOPED LANGUAGES.

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FOR AMERICA TO ACHIEVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEMS OF MODERN SOCIETY, IN A WORLD WHERE ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DEPRIVATION ARE THE NORM, THE SPANISH LANGUAGE MUST BE RECOGNIZED AS THE MOST IMPORTANT, AND POTENTIALLY THE MOST REWARDING, PART OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM. LANGUAGE PREFERENCES IN THE UNITED STATES HAVE GENERALLY FOLLOWED THE TRENDS OF INTERNATIONAL PRESTIGE, AND, SINCE THE CENTER OF GRAVITY HAS SHIFTED TO THE UNDERDEVELOPED AREAS OF THE WORLD, LATIN AMERICAN CULTURE, RELATIVELY MORE PROGRESSIVE AND SHARING WITH US A COMMON EUROPEAN HERITAGE, IS THE MOST ACCESSIBLE. THE HUMANISTIC CONTENT OF LATIN AMERICAN AUTHORS IS MORE RELEVANT TO CURRENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES THAN THE TRADITIONAL WESTERN EUROPEAN CLASSICS. EVEN FROM A DOMESTIC POINT OF VIEW, SPANISH IS THE ONLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE WIDELY SPOKEN IN AMERICA, AND THE UNDERSTANDING AND ASSIMILATION OF SPANISH-SPEAKING MINORITIES IS ONE OF THE PRESSING PROBLEMS OF AMERICAN SOCIETY. FINALLY, SPANISH IS MOST IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT IS EASY, AND, AFFECTED MORE DEEPLY THAN OTHER LANGUAGES BY PROGRESSIVE TEACHING METHODS, IT IS A MORE VALUABLE AND PROMISING STUDY FOR THE AVERAGE STUDENT. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL BULLETIN," VOLUME 27, NUMBER 3, FEBRUARY 1968, PAGES 27-30. (RW)

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Our Underdeveloped Languages

By William R. Link

Mr. Link, Head of the History Department at Commonwealth School, Boston, Massachusetts, begs us to abolish curricular discrimination against Spanish and Portuguese. These languages, he says, are essential in helping Americans to understand their society, their hemisphere, and their world.

Two earlier articles by Mr. Link appeared in the December 1966 and the October 1967 issues of The Bulletin.

The humanities are the sick man of American education, and one of his most ailing limbs is the language curriculum in the schools. It suffers from progressive atrophy and can sustain only the most genteel of burdens. The internal and external strains of our society tax it too heavily; consequently, this curriculum does not deserve the unquestioned confidence which it still enjoys.

French is the queen of the language hive. There are several reasons for this, and they illuminate the way in which curricula evolve and maintain themselves. In the late nineteenth century, when our language priorities were being assigned, French culture and literature still dominated Europe. To be sure, Germany, being only second best, tried harder, but her cultural achievements were never quite as impressive to Americans as her industrial ones. German remained the second-best modern language in American schools. Furthermore, the study of both French and German was essentially a scholarly activity: that is, something undertaken in leisure time for the purpose of self-cultivation. Most Americans, even on the eastern seaboard, where the cultural and material ties with Europe were strongest, had little practical need for French or German. They were, in fact, part of the cultural impedimenta of the upper middle class, a linguistic version of Thorstein Veblen's conspicuous consumption.

What was largely true of the study of French and German in the East became utterly true as the established curriculum reproduced itself in the West and South. Americans west of the Appalachians had practically no use for French or German. Their study became a useless ritual in which student, student's family, and teacher engaged, because it conferred intellectual and social prestige. Modern languages were for show, not for blow. For the teacher, the situation was chronically frustrating. On the one hand, if he was at all conscientious and well-educated, he regarded his subject highly. French and German were worth speaking well, and their literatures were worth studying carefully. On the other hand, the more he tried to put these convictions into practice, the more he fetched up against the perfunctory indifference of his pupils. Finding himself the only true believer in a class full of infidels, the teacher soon became the defender of the faith rather than its propagator. Like all the priests of functionless rites, he elaborated increasingly complicated rules for the transmission of the sacred body of knowledge. Only the elect would enter the sacred grove. The infidels would be forever excluded. The result was sterility.

The blow languages in nineteenth century American schools were, *mirabile dictu*, Greek and Latin. It was they that built character, trained the mind and memory, and provided food for thought and patterns of behavior. In a pretechnological age they occupied the central place in the curriculum which mathematics and science hold today. At the turn of the century, when it became clear even to educators that technology had won the day in our society, the classics began their headlong retreat. More recently, this flight has slowed to a walk because students have realized that the successful study of Latin stimulates the yes-glands of college admission officers. On the whole, however, the classics, which had been the curricular cornerstones of the past, were replaced by the sciences, which promised greater benefits for the future. The pragmatic good sense of this shift would have delighted Jeremy Bentham. French and German, which

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were ornamental, were untouched by this reorientation. The moral of the story is that in education, as elsewhere, the everyday tools wear out and have to be replaced or improved upon; the luxury goods become heirlooms and pass undisturbed from generation to generation. Change is the price of use.

THINGS remained unchanged, the classics losing ground and modern languages losing vitality, until World War II. The tidal wave of war swept away the desiccated methods of language teaching, but like many tidal waves before and since, it left the foundation of the system intact. Millions of Americans were sent abroad and discovered that foreign lands were real and foreign languages practical. They returned, married, and had children. They became members of the PTA and were elected to school committees, and a lot of them remembered that the foreign language training which *they* had received before the war had failed to pass the test of use. The fattening economy of postwar America and her increased international power added weight to this conviction. Increasing swarms of vacationing Americans flitted from country to country, dusting themselves with the phrases of a dozen languages. The government and the press reminded them daily of their obligation to feed, clothe, and protect millions of people. International travel and politics had become a part of American life. Modern language teachers awoke one day to find that administrators and parents were now demanding the fluency which they had deprecated in the past. Language laboratories and oral-aural programs sprouted overnight like toadstools, and student tours of Europe became almost as common as drive-in movies. Modern languages at last were considered to be a useful ingredient in our educational diet.

It would be nice if the story ended on this note. It doesn't. It can't, because the languages which our children are learning to use will be of little use to them. French and German no longer proclaim their gospel of cultural and political development. Europe has become peripheral; France and Germany are *petit* powers, whose voices—in spite of the raucous croak of de Gaulle—do not speak with the authority of two generations ago. The centers of gravity of our age have slipped from Europe to Asia, Africa, and Latin-America. Willy-nilly, their destinies and problems are ours. Of course, they can be understood fully only in relation to European expansion, but French and German are seldom taught with this in mind. The point is that much of the standard work in high school language courses is still quite irrelevant to the world in which our students live. Certainly, they *can* speak French and German. It *is* fun to tour Europe. It *is* culturally satisfying to discuss Flaubert and Goethe in their native languages. It probably is more gracious to close business deals in the language of the people with whom you intend to trade. But few Americans are going to do this more than once or twice in their lives. Are from three to six years of curriculum time worth such a small reward?

IRONICALLY, the circumstances of American life before World War II prevented us from being sufficiently conversant with Europe when she was important to us, and the changes wrought by the war have made us far more conversant with her than she now deserves. This gap between modern language curriculum and the needs of our society is regrettable but understandable. Educational institutions, especially in their role of purveyor of the humanities, are conservative places. Teachers of history and literature rightfully regard themselves as the guardians of the achievements and traditions of the past. It is they who preserve continuity and standards for society by civilizing each wave of young savages. They have, in addition, a vested interest in their subject. Their dedication to it, and the years of training which the mastery of anything entails do not incline them to be objective about what they teach. Between the battle of Lepanto and World War I, Europe was the most powerful force at work in the world. European culture and technology swept all before it, and the world was ravished. The natural desire of Europeans and Americans to perpetuate their own culture coincided perfectly with what was happening all over the globe. European civilization was superior by any material standard, and this superiority was enshrined in many places, including the language curriculum of schools everywhere.

The momentum of the present curriculum is also sustained by pointing to the humanistic value of its content. If Racine and Goethe were masters of style and characterization in the past, they must play the same part in the present. I agree; young minds are improved by reading the classics of French and German literature. The question is not whether they should be abandoned, but whether these languages merit the exclusive monopoly in the schools which they now enjoy. They teach something; do they teach enough in a polycentric world where three-quarters of the population don't have enough to eat? Balzac was a great novelist; so was Machado de Assis, who understood far more about poor and racially mixed societies than the Frenchman ever could. Great chunks of Balzac's fictional world have slipped away forever. Machado's world of small winners is still with us with a vengeance. For my money, the Brazilian author offers more useful and varied food for thought to a young student than Balzac. One swallow doesn't make a summer, and Machado's greatness by itself is not a sufficient reason for replacing French with

Portuguese, but it might not be too difficult to build a good case for putting them on an equal footing.

The shock waves created by Sputnik cracked the foundation of the traditional language curriculum. A scramble began in colleges and schools to bring teaching into line with the fact of Russian power. German, which heretofore had been the useful, scientific language, was shoved aside by the obvious Russian superiority in missiles and rocketry. The enthusiasm for Russian waned a bit, once it became apparent that Russian was hard to learn and good Russian teachers even harder to find. In fact, Russian will certainly remain a minority language in the schools. It is very difficult and appeals only to the linguistic élite. Besides, while the national need for a larger body of well-informed students of Russian is great, they will always be a relatively small percentage of the population. The daily intellectual and political life of the nation can absorb only a limited number of Russian experts. These limitations apply as well to the even more exotic Oriental languages with which a small number of schools are now experimenting. If Russian is difficult, they are almost impossible, and if the elasticity of demand for Russian is comparatively small, it is even less for them. These programs must be encouraged as much as possible, but we should frankly admit that they are going to affect an even smaller number of students than Russian. The great value of these innovations is that they have begun to bring modern language curricula into line with the political and cultural realities of the twentieth century. They may have jarred our thinking enough so that we shall push this realignment through to its logical conclusion: the reevaluation of Spanish.

THE sign of the selective school, except in the Southwest and California, is the absence of Spanish from the list of courses. When Spanish is included, it is only for the dopes. The students who have been convicted of linguistic stupidity are sentenced to Spanish and serve their time until good behavior earns release. The most appropriate language for American students to learn is given the least appropriate place in the curriculum. A large claim? Perhaps, but I think that it can be substantiated.

It is clear that our foreign language preferences have always responded, albeit ineffectually, to international power—either the cultural power of France or the scientific and industrial power of Germany and more recently of Russia. Historically, we have been accustomed to think of power in its positive manifestation: the capacity to do. This makes it difficult to realize that power has another dimension: the *in*capacity to do. It is the failure of the overwhelming majority of mankind to cope with overpopulation, disease, poverty, and lack of education which threatens the United States today. Our history and wealth make it hard for most Americans even to glimpse the meaning of this global deprivation. As if this weren't enough, the European orientation of our schools and culture has prevented most of us from understanding anything but the most superficial aspects of the Asian and African nations. Yet, whether we like it or not, we and our children must live in a world in which cultural disintegration and material want are the norm. How can we devise and judge national policies toward poor countries if we remain ignorant of what the problems are and what kinds of solutions are reasonable?

More than one hundred and eighty million people live and starve south of the Rio Grande. Within twenty-five years, their number will have doubled. Nobody knows exactly how many of them speak Spanish or Portuguese, but most of them do. They are wretched and rightfully restive. How powerful they can be and how little we understand them may be inferred from the hysterically inept reaction of our government to "the threat" posed to our "security" by two puny Caribbean islands which wanted a more equitable society. Our ignorance has done us and them incalculable harm; yet of all the developing areas of the world Latin-America should be the easiest for us to understand. Their language is European and their culture has European roots. No matter how much intermingling there has been of African, Indian, and European elements in South America, the tone and attitudes of these societies are much closer to us than those anywhere else in the underdeveloped world. Furthermore, these countries are farther along the road of accelerated development than the other poor areas of the world.

The Latin-Americans have been wrestling a long time with dual economies, too-rapid urbanization and its attendant cultural shock, and inadequate administrative and educational systems. As a consequence, they know a good bit more about several aspects of instant rags-to-riches than anybody else. Mexico has mobilized the intellectual resources of the entire country to solve her educational problem without foreign help, and few nations in her position have shown so much imagination in the production of textbooks and the design of school facilities. The group of structural economists which is based chiefly in Chile is persuasively arguing that rapid economic development in a poor country necessarily entails moderate inflation. A conservative would urge that this is to turn vice into virtue. A post-Keynesian might say that this is a brilliant insight and that what's sauce for the advanced goose is definitely *not* sauce for the backward gander. Rightly or wrongly, the doctrine has great appeal in South America and elsewhere. The writers of Chile, Argentina, and Mexico are reflecting in their

work social and economic dislocations of a greater magnitude than those which swept western Europe in the nineteenth century. They are recording a story of suffering and struggle similar to those told by Zola and Dickens. These Latin-Americans, however, can interpret more for us than their own societies; for as they portray their own cultures, they are sketching by implication the rest of the poor world as well. Comparisons may be odious, but they are useful if you have nothing else. Since our educational system cannot provide enough courses to overcome the national ignorance concerning Africa and Asia and Latin-America, we shall have to do the best we can. Quite simply, South America must serve as a synthesis of what is likely to happen on other developing continents. Her novels, poetry, and history are a mirror in which large numbers of youngsters can learn to recognize and understand the basic features of all the underdeveloped countries.

SPANISH is also a domestic necessity. It is the only foreign language that is widely spoken in the United States, and its speakers are increasing. Every major city has a Spanish ghetto: Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans, and others. Each month, a few hundred more trickle in, unskilled and unable to speak English. There are few jobs, few houses, and little sympathy for people with dark skins and shredded English. There aren't enough people to talk to them or to train them. When things get bad, they drift into crime. When things get really bad, they riot. Our cities suffer from many things; one of them is a lack of Spanish-speaking teachers and social workers. The dispossessed of our cities are aliens in the sleek society, but the sleek society itself is alien to the world at large. A subway ride to Harlem will take a young person to a stranger world than a jet flight to Europe. An advanced Spanish student's stint as a volunteer social worker or tutor will do more to ripple the glassy calm of complacency than a meander through the Louvre. Europe is fast becoming America's continental Disneyland, a cultivated cut-rate amusement park. The Spanish-speaking slums of New York and Chicago are a microcosm of the world around us. They are a laboratory in which the student can use what he has learned, and learn what he must use in order to cope with underdevelopment here and everywhere.

Spanish is easy. That's why it has always been our language dump. It is also why it is so much more important than any other language taught in our schools today. Most students are mediocre at languages, but a mediocre student can learn more Spanish in less time than is possible with any other tongue. In fact, he can learn it quite well, and if it is taught primarily from the point of view of the history and socio-economic development of Latin-America, he will learn a great deal more than just a language. Besides, Spanish is a see-say-spell affair. If you can pronounce it correctly, you can spell it correctly, and almost all of its words look the way they sound. For a nation of bad spellers who are getting worse, this is no mean technical advantage. Spanish has also profited from being the ugly duckling of the language departments. It did not become the institutionalized sacred cow that French became, and its teaching methods were correspondingly less embalmed. This meant that the revolution in language teaching which the structural linguists have provoked in the last twenty years penetrated Spanish teaching more easily and more deeply than French. Any doubting Thomas may confirm this by leafing through *Modern Spanish* (Harcourt, Brace), the best beginning language textbook in print today. Finally, both the learning and teaching of Spanish can escape the academic last. For once, the irrelevance which curses so much of our formal education can be considerably reduced. Students learn well whatever they think is fun and/or useful for them, and nothing else. They also learn best when they are encouraged to teach themselves rather than when they are taught. The plight of the Spanish-speaking minority in this country is blatantly relevant to any high school student in a large city. There is no reason why half the class time of third- and fourth-year Spanish classes could not be devoted to helping Spanish-speaking children learn English. The student-teachers would learn much more Spanish than in the classroom because their contact with the material would be active and useful rather than passive and artificial. What else both tutor and tutee would learn is hard to define and impossible to overvalue.

To sum up, then, Spanish and Portuguese are essential in helping Americans to understand their society, their hemisphere, and their world. These languages can be taught imaginatively and effectively to great numbers of students across the nation, and their teachers and materials are comparatively plentiful. I am not for a moment suggesting that all other languages and all Afro-Asian history courses be scrapped; however, our power is so great, our knowledge of the poor world so abysmal, and time so short that we must bend every effort to avoid catastrophe. If the aim of education is to enable people to know what to do and to do what they know, a tiny step toward this goal will be taken by abolishing curricular discrimination against Spanish and Portuguese.